Short term counseling principles in working with students, even in multiple problem context

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Talking, talking, talking ... ??

Student psychologists or counselors tend to have too much “talking” (“listening”) sessions with the students and to focus on too much and explore too much the feelings and experiences. In many cases there is no need to and it seems even to function as avoiding behavior not only on the side of the student but also on the side of the counselor. Moreover it is important to be able to serve as many students as possible. This is only possible with more focus on short-term counseling even in situations where a longer focus on feelings and experiences could be motivated. In this workshop we will argue that there is still a lot that can be done on a short term. We will illustrate this.

Introduction: Context

➢ From
  Less students and more time
  to
  More students with more and more complex counseling requests and (thus) less time

➢ More international students = specific problems and issues

Thus we were forced by the context to work more on a short term base

  = less listening and exploring sessions
Student counseling services in this context

- Low threshold for passing by or making appointment
- Easily accessible and quickly available
- 4 student psychologists for 8000 students (campus Brussels)
- Stuvoplus website: www.stuvoplus.be
- Collective sessions on common themes based on psycho-education (one session per theme)
- Presentations and short overviews of powerful behavioral advises for common problems
- Study registration forms and planning forms

Short-term individual psychological counseling: General principles

➢ Confidential
➢ Short-term = between 2 and 7-8 sessions
➢ Focus on Problem solving
➢ Focus on Psycho-education
➢ Work more “action-oriented” than “emotion oriented”
➢ First focus on study-attitude and study-competences (within difficult context)
➢ Co-focus on psychosocial well-being as to enhance adequate study attitude and competences
➢ With respect for and taking into account the diversity
Individual short term counseling: How to proceed

- Define the study related problems
- Define the psychosocial problem areas/domains/lines...
  - **Life domains**: e.g. relationship with mother – leisure...
  - **Circumstances**: e.g. high demands at work – depressed mother...
  - **Personal styles**: e.g. always want to please – being perfectionistic – worrying and ruminating – too much fear of rejection...
  - **Personal pitfalls**: e.g. forgetting myself – quickly feeling that I am doing too little – letting others come across my borders – continue until I crash...

- Perspective of “psycho-education”
- Focus on short term problem solving
  - Set a global goal (challenge...) for each area.
    - improve general relationship with father,
    - learning to say no
    - learning to ask for support
  - Look for concrete actions/steps (to come closer to the goal)
  - Filter out and re-inforce (already tried out) working strategies
- Follow up along these lines in a way that respects the students tempo and strengths
- Take into account the stages of motivation (see next)
Individual short term counseling: How to define

- Solving all problems is never the aim.
- Focus on actions in the right direction.

We aim to:

- Regain overview over the situation
- Regain control over the situation
- Encounter more acceptance
- Deal with “pathology” rather than to cure “pathology”

Individual short term counseling: Limits and expectations

- Clearly indicate your limits
- Do not create unrealistic expectations.
- For longer term, more exploring ...therapy: refer to external therapist /psychiatre
- Important to believe yourself in usefulness of your short-term approach
- Take into account the stage of motivation and stage of the student's life.
Stages of motivation for change (prochaska & Di Climente)

learning to change

= change takes effort
= it’s always about trial and error
= it always demands a leap in “the horribleness of the moment”

1. **Pre-contemplation**: people think I should, maybe I should
2. **Contemplation**: I think I should actually ...
3. **Preparation**: I am thinking about how I could handle it, I will try
4. **Action phase**: I am going to, I will do
5. **Maintenance phase or relapse prevention**

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Individual short term counseling: stages of motivation for change (prochaska & Di Climente)

Make explicit the stage of motivation and discuss it if necessary

I will try

= Now decide that you will then decide
= that you will make it depend on the moment / "mood" / "appetite"
  (emotion-oriented decision making)
= **contemplation or preparation phase**
= Re-define it as “think about”

I will do

= now decide that you will do it then (action oriented decision)
= **action phase**
Example: depressed mother claiming too much time and extremely guilt inducing

- Explore one or two examples, with focus on reactions
- Not focus on “how did you feel about” (= exploring)
- Empathic reaction: “that must be hard to handle”
- Give information f.e. about *healthy selfishness* and how you help the person more with such attitude on the long run
- Formulate a global aim: create more distance to mother
- Find examples of what can be done in the direction of the global aim

Individual short term counseling: Conversation techniques

- Replace “going into complaining” by a short empathic reaction
- Look for minor changes
- Stimulate the student to see alternatives
- Stimulate the student to see his own choice moments
- De-culpabilize / enhance external attribution where it is more appropriate
- Advise to react differently than the student is used to
Individual short term counseling: Conversation techniques

- Normalize where you can
- Enhance healthy selfishness
- Put forward the student’s strengths
- Even in the case of infrequent appointments: be supportive
- Give the student a written “action plan”

Example of a WrAP (Written Action Plan)

Action plan for Y (depressive feelings, hypersensitivity, stress for deadlines and speaking in public, ruminating about broken relationship)

1. Write an imagery letter to your boyfriend with two focuses
   - Why I miss him
   - Why he is a bastard...

2. Doing little nice things (shopping, taking a shower, visiting a museum, ....) and noticing them as “good I have done this”.

3. Make an appointment with a friend (despite the sadness)

4. Exposure exercise “Speaking in public”:
   *In stead of thinking: “I want to be 100% sure that my mind will not block” I exercise the thought: “I realise that my mind could block and if it would happen, so be it”, in the worst case I’ll have to retake it.*

5. Study registration and Tips for study-attitude/study methods (see documents)
Individual short term counseling: Approach techniques / schemes...

- Enhance “exposure” (“exposure-attitude”)
- Enhance Mindfull approach in coping with thoughts – worrying – rumination
- Re-interpretation / challenging thoughts / testing interpretations (behavioral experiment)
  - F.e. give an alternative vision on being weak or being strong
- Work with self-registration (mainly for study-behavior)

Individual short term counseling: Approach techniques / schemes...

- Enhance self-esteem (short version of Manja De Neefs method in working with negative self-esteem)
- Enhance acceptance of what cannot be changed
- Use Pennebakers writing paradigm for dealing with difficult life experiences (don’t go into exploring all these experiences yourself)
- Use Short term programme for dealing with Failure anxiety (Own Programme)
- (Relaxation)
Complex Case: Julia from Venezuela

- **Traumatic experience and Self-esteem**: (humiliation “I’m capable of nothing” gave rise to *depressive feelings and worrying*)
- **Family relations (ruminating)**: Homesick and anxious that something would happen with parents (Caracas = very dangerous), experiencing lack of support
- **Relationship with boy friend (anxiety)**
- **Fear of failure**
- **Lack of study behaviour**

17-18: second semester: 6 meetings
18-19: second semester: 2 meetings follow up

Action plan for Julia

1. **Traumatic experience**
   - Pennebakers writing instruction
   - Exposure with recorded fragment: make a fist while formulating “I’m capable of a lot of things and my brain works perfectly
   - Talk about with friend

2. **Self-esteem: Dare to be proud!**
   - Notice the little nice things: “good I have done this” + ”I have done this very well”

3. **Family relations (home-sick / anxiety)**
   - Think about how to get more support from home
   - There could happen something to parents: is it reason not to study abroad?

4. **Boyfriend**
   - Exposure: how will I organise my life if he would break up with me?

5. **Study registration and Tips for study-attitude /study methods**

6. **Failure-anxiety**: Follow collective session
Study - Action plan for Julia

1. Realize and defy the “horribleness of the moment”
   The hardest part is initiating the study-activity
   You don’t need to be “in the mood” !!!

2. Set your weekly goal and stick to your goal
   Use short available moments in between. Every half hour counts

3. Registrate every study-activity (see registration form)
   If you take a break, always determine when you will start again
   **Start within 15 minutes** when you come home or after meal
   Start with the least pleasant courses

4. Avoid temptations and distractions (empty desk…)

5. Stay conscious of **why you are doing this**, of what you want to achieve

6. Studying actively makes it easier (see checklist)

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**Study registration form for Julia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>From ...till</th>
<th>What done</th>
<th>Concentration</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
<th>Total study-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tu 8-10</td>
<td>16u10-17u40</td>
<td>Economy: 10 pages</td>
<td>(0 - 10) 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1u30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Break till: 20.00</td>
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<td>Break till:</td>
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Weekly goal: 20 hrs  
Weekly total:  

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Addendum; Common statements that are related to short or longterm counseling/therapy.

- A good understanding takes a long time
- Short term working cannot be empathic
- A student has to jump to the conclusions himself
- If you explore long enough (with empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness) change will automatically follow
- In short term counseling you work only symptom related and the underlying psychodynamics are not touched or questioned
- Personal growth or change takes time
- You need to know what the origins of the behavior was in order to change the behavior
- ...

Addendum: Listening and exploration of feelings... as possible avoidance behavior from the therapist

- **Listening (exploring thoughts and feelings...)**
  - does not require much preparation
  - does not require much talking form the therapist (explaining.... in the sense of psycho-education )
  - Does not require much follow-up

- **Listening serves as a momentary relief for the student** (the therapist becomes an inhibitory stimulus)

- **Giving advice/ action plan / for changing behavior ...**
  - = hard labour (f.e. motivational conversation)
  - = gives risk that it does not work
  - = requires that you make explicit how you see the problem
  - = requires follow up of the action plan
Addendum: Listening and exploration of feelings... as possible avoidance behavior from the therapist

- **Working on a shorter term (= shorter intake and quickly going into psycho-education and giving advice)**
  - Risk that you overlook something
  - Risk to insufficiently recognize the problem and the complexity
  - Risk that you are not be empathic enough
  - Risk that it gives not rise to a confidential relationship

- **Listening gives the illusion that you are working**